

The Dissemination and Transformation of "A Doll's House" in China from the Perspective of Emotional History: An Analysis Centered on the Emotional Community of Nora

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ABSTRACT

This study is conducted from the perspective of emotional history, focusing on the adaptation, acceptance and dissemination process of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in China, and particularly analyzes how the image of "Nora" was transformed into an emotional symbol with symbolic and mobilizing power by different subjects during the May Fourth Period. By sorting out the texts of Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Lu Yin and others, and combining the practice of stage plays with social responses, the study aims at presenting a multi-level and heterogeneous social emotional picture. Research has found that the acceptance of the image of Nora during the May Fourth Period was essentially an experiment to reconstruct the emotional system. Different groups localized the individualistic emotions in the work and completed the symbolic reconstruction. The construction of the emotional community of Nora not only promoted the awakening of gender consciousness but also facilitated the transformation of social structural imagination, which provides a richer path for understanding the May Fourth Movement and its historical influence.

KEYWORDS

Emotional history; A doll's house; Nora; May-fourth period; Social reform

1 Introduction

Since its introduction to China in 1899, *A Doll's House* rapidly became a core text of the discussion on women's liberation during the May-Fourth period. Existing research mostly focuses on the dimension of social criticism, but rarely analyzes the historical driving forces contained in its dissemination process from an emotional perspective. In fact, the symbolic reconstruction of Nora's "departure" by intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement period elevated her from a narrative of personal awakening to a symbol of social change. Essentially, this was an emotional mobilization practice: when the image of Nora transcends cultural contexts, why can it trigger emotional resonance among intellectuals, the female group, and the middle class? How do the differentiated interpretations of this symbol by different groups (such as Hu Shi's idealistic adaptation, Lu Xun's realistic deconstruction, and the survival resistance of the female workers' group) reflect the conflict and reshaping of the emotional system and the emotions of the masses during the May-Fourth period? More importantly, how exactly has the construction and dissemination of such emotional symbols promoted the awakening of gender consciousness and the transformation of social structural imagination? The exploration of these issues can not only fill the gap in existing research in the emotional dimension, but also take "Nora" as the entry point to re-examine the unique value of emotions as a historical driving force in the enlightenment of May-Fourth thought and social transformation.

2 The background of the study and the raise of the question

In the traditional research of the May Fourth Movement, the academic circle often focuses on the ideological enlightenment of "democracy and science" and literary innovation, and so on, but to a large extent, it neglects emotion as the key driving force for historical change. In fact, from student petitions and newspaper debates to drama performances and translation and dissemination, the process of social mobilization during the May-Fourth period was always inseparable from the construction of emotional resonance and group identity. Scholar Wang Qisheng pointed out that the influence of the periodical *New Youth* stems more from media dissemination, emotional mobilization and the shaping of cultural symbols rather than the systematic nature of the new concepts proposed by this periodical. This viewpoint provides an important enlightenment for us to understand the "movement" of the May Fourth Movement, that is, to pay attention to how emotions can shape people's behaviors and identities through institutions, media and culture, etc.

This study takes "emotional history" as its theoretical perspective, focusing on the adaptation, acceptance and dissemination process of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in China, and analyzing how the image of "Nora" was transformed into an emotional symbol with symbolic and mobilizing power by different subjects during the May-Fourth period. This paper focuses on analyzing the internal logic of intellectuals' adaptation and dissemination, as well as the differences and tensions within this group, and the derivative works related to "Nora" that the female group has performed and

transformed through writing and stage plays. By sorting out the texts of Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Lu Yin and others, and combining stage play practice and social response, this article attempts to present a multi-level and heterogeneous social emotional picture, and explore how this emotional community continuously influenced social cognition from the 1920s to the 1930s.

3 The theoretical framework

3.1 William Reddy's theory of emotional regime

The concept of "Emotional Regimes" proposed by William Reddy points out that every historical era has its institutionally prescribed "expressible emotions", which imply the operation of power and moral norms. This concept stresses that the natural language of the emotion is not only a personal experience, but shaped by the social structure and in the context of a specific allowed, encourage or suppress the behavior of it under different historical background, to explore the expression of a variety of emotions and control provides a powerful analysis tool. In his research on the emotional politics of the French Revolution, Reddy found that the dominant emotional system during this period was mainly "revolutionary passion" dominated by anger and patriotism.

By comparing the occurrence of the French Revolution with the May Fourth-New Culture Movement, the "emotional system" in China during the May-Fourth period presented a development path that was completely different from that of the West. Unlike the "revolutionary passion" norms promoted by the government from top to bottom during the French Revolution, Chinese society had established a deep foundation of disciplining people's emotion from the traditional Confucianism. In the meantime, the intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement adopted a bottom-up emotional mobilization strategy and independently shaped a new moral order through media platforms and cultural practices. Progressive publications represented by the periodical *New Youth* have become the core field of this construction: Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi and others screened readers' letters through the "Correspondence" column, transforming abstract concepts such as "democracy" and "science" into perceptible emotional symbols. For instance, they criticized old ethics with the rhetoric of "anger" and depicted the blueprint of the new society with the words of "hope", making the publication an emotional container carrying "new morality". This construction does not rely on administrative power but rather, through cultural practices such as literary translation and theatrical performances, evokes emotional resonance among groups including intellectuals, students and citizens.

3.2 Lynn Hunt's new theory of cultural history and family romance

Lynn Hunt, as a leading advocate of the New Cultural History movement, views society and culture as a whole in her research approach, focusing on aspects such as material culture, body and gender, memory and language, image, and political culture. In "Family Romance during the French Revolution", she cites the concept of "family romance" to refer to the political or collective unconsciousness, as well as a certain collective and unconscious fantasy of family order that constitutes the political ideology of the French Revolution. This theory provides an important reference for us to analyze the family ethics reconstruction and political emotion projection triggered by *A Doll's House* during the May-Fourth period, helping us understand how individual emotions are endowed with collective political significance in the process of social transformation.

3.3 Barbara Rosenwein's theory of emotional community

Barbara Rosenwein's theory of Emotional Community focuses on the commonalities and differences in emotional expression and identification among different groups. During the May Fourth Movement, intellectuals, female groups and the middle class, based on their different interpretations of *A Doll's House*, formed emotional communities with their own characteristics. The interactions and games among these communities constituted an important part of the emotional politics of the May Fourth Movement.

3.4 Wang Qingjia's "in-depth cultural description" and research on emotional history

Professor Wang Qingjia pointed out that emotions are universal in human society, but their particularity in different eras and cultures makes them of significant historical research value. The expression of emotions varies significantly in different historical periods, and to a large extent, its composition and characteristics are the products of history and culture. This viewpoint emphasizes that the study of emotional history should focus on the "historicization of emotions", providing theoretical support for us to, in the context of modern China, reveal how structural oppression acts on individual life and how individuals resist, imagine and reconstruct society through emotional strategies. In his book *What is the History of Emotions*, Teacher Wang Qingjia points out that the research on the history of emotions by Japanese

scholars such as Nakamura Yasuko indicates that emotions are not appendages of history but rather manifestations of social structure and embedded parts of power mechanisms. Nakamura took poetry as an example for analysis, providing a detailed reference for the textual analysis of drama and other works in this study. Through the analysis of dramatic works, one can gain insight into human imagination and subjectivity. In the context of modern China, this perspective helps us to deeply explore how the dissemination of *A Doll's House* and other propaganda pieces collided with the traditional Chinese emotional system and thereby promoted the reshaping of social emotional norms.

4 The construction of the emotional regime: nora as the may fourth new moral norm

4.1 The emotional politicization of "departure"

Hu Shih and other intellectuals' translation, adaptation and promotion of *A Doll's House* mainly focused on modernizing the theme of Nora's "departure" to the ideological and political levels, intentionally or unintentionally neglecting its own dramatic artistry. As the first translation of "Nora" in China, Hu Shih and Luo Jialun's translation reflects the emotional interpretation of *A Doll's House* by intellectuals during the May Fourth-New Culture period. The mistranslations and omissions they made during the translation process made it more in line with the needs of ideological enlightenment, which had a significant impact on the acceptance of "Nora" in China. For instance, their handling of the images and relationships of the secondary characters, Mrs. Lyndon and Krogstad, as well as the portrayal of Helme and Dr. Rank's philosophical thoughts, all reduced the artistic quality of the work. This prompts people to pay more attention to its ideological nature, especially the feminist factors within it. Correspondingly, the deeper and more complex connotations in Ibsen's thoughts have been overlooked.

In his article "Problems and Ideologies", Zhang Baoming, a professor from the Department of History at Wuhan University, pointed out that the "dispute between problems and ideologies" between *New Youth* and *Weekly Review* is essentially a complementary debate between thought and reality, means and ends. Through this debate, the two sides achieve ideological complementarity and form a double-win situation in the sense of intellectual history. This logic also applies to the polysemous interpretation of the symbol "Nora" in the context of emotional politics. The adaptation of *A Doll's House* by intellectuals has a distinct idealistic narrative color. Hu Shih and other New Culture schools simplified the exodus to a symbol of anti-feudalism, stripping away the realistic dimensions such as economic hardship in Ibsen's original work, such as Nora's economic dependence on Helme and other details, making it an idealistic banner. This simplified treatment serves the construction of the enlightenment discourse, elevating the pursuit of love from the shackles of feudalism to the totem of spiritual awakening, just like the "purpose fever" attribute endowed to "doctrine" in "Problem and Doctrine". Similar idealistic projections are also reflected in the "Nora-style" female characters created by writers such as Bing Xin and Lu Yin in their novels. These characters often carry surreal pursuits such as independent personality and spiritual freedom, and even elevate "departure" to a rebellion against the entire feudal cultural system, echoing the ideal dimension represented by "idealism".

In contrast, Lu Xun deconstructed idealism in *Lament over the Dead* (Shangshi). The article, with the tragic ending of Zijun "starving to death at the doorsill", profoundly reveals the survival predicament of the lack of economic independence, just like the emphasis on the reality of "problems" in "Problems and" Doctrines". The tension between the two complements each other. On the one hand, it provides the spiritual impetus for resistance; on the other hand, it emphasizes the material basis for change, jointly promoting the ideological trend of women's liberation to shift from abstract slogans to the exploration of concrete paths.

4.2 The establishment and differentiation of emotional communities

During the May Fourth Movement, different groups, based on differences such as social classes, educational backgrounds, transformed Nora into their own emotional symbols, which not only formed a joint force to criticize tradition but also concealed the tension between reality and ideals. The new-youth group has formed a "rebellious emotional alliance" through forms such as discussion meetings and drama performances. Take the public debate triggered by the performance of the Beiping Women's Normal School in 1923 as an example. By combining the audience's reactions and media reports, it can be seen that the performance not only sparked intense discussions among the intellectual circle but also aroused widespread emotional resonance and controversy among the common people.

Among the female group, the narrative of educated women represented by Lu Yin's *Old Friends by the Seaside* has constructed an idealistic emotional community among female students. This novel narrates the correspondence between young girls and presents a rare text from the May-Fourth period that expresses emotional experiences from a female personal perspective. The protagonist, Lusha, is confronted with the complex struggle between emotional oppression, social ethics and idealism. In her letter to Ziqing, she mentions that "love has matured for a long time" and "only the environment is favorable, and it has long passed away", and so on, which reflects the passionate pursuit of equal love and

emotional autonomy by the educated women of the May Fourth Movement, as well as their anxiety in the face of this idealism and the fact that reality has not provided space for such love. If "running away" is the ideal emotional symbol constructed by the intellectuals of the new culture, the female narrative represented by Lusha shows that the emotions of the women of the May Fourth Movement cannot only focus on the ideal description of awakening. Additionally, the silent and withdrawn individual experiences are equally important, which is an important path to explore dignity, autonomy and emotional justice. For instance, although the female workers' group did not directly respond to the intellectuals' discussion of "leaving", they demonstrated an emotional outburst from individual anger to collective action through collective actions driven by emotions. During the May 30th Movement, female workers were confronted with dual emotional discipline. On the one hand, the feudal subcontracting system defined "compliance" as a legitimate emotion through the "subcontracting contract". On the other hand, factory management suppressed the rebellious sentiment with the "copying system" and "no contact with outsiders". The expression of these emotions from the bottom of society was institutionalized and concealed. During the May 30th Movement in 1925, female workers in Japanese-funded cotton mills in Shanghai destroyed the workers' workshops and damaged the machines. Engaging in resistance through intense means such as beating or even assassinating contractors is essentially a concentrated release of long-suppressed survival anger, confirming the direct impact of the labor group's resistance against emotional submission on social movements. This resistance shows that emotional mobilization is not exclusive to the elite but can penetrate social structures and trigger real actions.

In the face of the emotional wave triggered by *A Doll's House*, conservatives showed intense "anxiety" and resistance, which persisted until the 1930s. For instance, during the "Nora Incident" in Nanjing in 1935, female teachers and students in Nanjing were restricted from performing *Nora* by the authorities of various schools, and most of the participants were punished with suspension from school. This reflected that the emotional system of society at that time was still based on the Confucian principle that "the husband is the guide for the wife". However, in the first half of the 20th century, Chinese society made considerable progress. The vigorous development of industrialization and urbanization brought about various effects, and people's emotions also changed accordingly. The "*Nora*" adaptation, which contradicted the emotional system, advocated that women should "strive for equal rights as men in terms of human status". Although it faced strong counter forces, in the 1930s, the emotional support for women's pursuit of freedom and equality was already evident. Many articles, such as Ling Wu's *Nora Special Edition: On the Nanjing Nora Incident in 1935 and Nora, Be Braver!* This sentiment was supported by Yin Jia's series of works such as *Nora's Way Out* in the *Women Youth* magazine.

5 The multiple aspects and realistic tensions of emotional practice: from textual deconstruction to social games

5.1 Intellectuals idealistic deconstruction and their questioning of reality

In *What Happened After Nora Left* and *Lament over the Dead*, Lu Xun, with his cold and stern writing style, tore off the veil of Hu Shi-style idealism. He sharply pointed out that if *Nora* lacks economic power and social system support, the "departure" of Zi Jun in *Lament over the Dead* will eventually become a tragedy of "starving to death at the doorsill". This "narrative of frustration" is essentially a realistic deconstruction of the discourse of enlightenment. While intellectuals like Hu Shi simplified "departure" to a symbol of anti-feudalism, Lu Xun revealed that merely discussing "spiritual awakening", stripping away the core predicament of "economic dependence" in Ibsen's original works, such as *Nora*'s financial attachment to Helme, would only lead to new disillusionment. This ideological tension forms a complementary relationship: Hu Shi provided the emotional impetus for resistance, while Lu Xun consolidated the material foundation for change, jointly promoting the transformation of women's liberation from an abstract slogan to the exploration of a concrete path of "economic independence and social reconstruction".

5.2 The emotional domestication and symbolic reconstruction of citizen culture

The acceptance of "*Nora*" by the citizen stratum shows a typical "pragmatic adjustment". Popular publications such as *Saturday* have reimagined *Nora* as a "new-style virtuous wife and good mother": on the one hand, they retain her "independent" label; on the other hand, they incorporate the spirit of resistance into the traditional ethical framework through plot adaptations, such as "still caring for the family after leaving". This adaptation strategy coincides with Reddy's "emotional system" theory. When radical emotional symbols conflict with local ethics, citizen culture will spontaneously carry out "emotional domestication", resolving the core contradiction to make foreign ideas conform to the local aesthetic habit. In the process of accepting the Western individualism reflected in *A Doll's House*, the masses gradually transformed "personality independence" into "family improvement". For instance, in the adaptation of the novel, after *Nora* left, she returned to her hometown to establish a girls' school. This approach not only retained the symbol of "new women" but

also returned to the social expectation of a "virtuous wife and good mother" through the narrative of "saving the country through education", reflecting the emotional compromise of the citizen stratum between tradition and modernity.

5.3 Emotional breakthrough and class differences among female groups

Lu Yin's *Old Friends by the Seaside* constructs an "emotional utopia" in the form of a private letter. The female student Lu Sha and her friends dream of retiring in a "seaside retreat", using natural images such as "clear streams" and "pear blossoms" to wrap up their rebellious consciousness. This "practice of eliminating implicit emotions" is different from radical departure. Instead, it opens up a discourse space where "emotions can be expressed" through literary imagination. When marital autonomy in reality is still suppressed by "parental orders", educated women transform the spirit of Nora into symbolic "emotional enclaves" and complete their gentle resistance to traditional ethics in letters and diaries. However, the text simultaneously reveals the rift between ideals and reality: Lusha eventually gave up her studies due to her family's pressure to get married, and her "inability to escape" ending is precisely a microcosm of the struggle of intellectual women in the narrow gap between old and new ethics.

In contrast to the metaphorical resistance of educated women in their writing, during the May 30th Movement, the indentured workers demonstrated a completely different discourse of the "Nora's departure" through violent means such as destroying machines and attacking foremen: compared to "marriage freedom", "smashing the indentured contract" and "striving for wage rights" were the core of the emotional outburst. This kind of "existential anger" was referred to by Reddy as "a break in the emotional system". When the feudal subcontracting system defined "compliance" as a legitimate emotion and factory management suppressed resistance with the "copying system", the destructive behavior of female workers was essentially a violent breakthrough from the dual emotional discipline. It is worth noting that they have never invoked the symbol of "Nora", but have more directly echoed Lu Xun's assertion that "economic power is more important than love" through physical practice, demonstrating the unique emotional political logic of the underprivileged.

5.4 Emotional mobilization and social competition in stage performance

In the 1930s, Lan Ping starred in "Nora", which transformed textual symbols into collective emotional events: when she "slammed the door" on the stage, the sobs and applause that burst out from the audience seats turned the theater into a political arena for emotional resonance. The "Nora Special" of the "Current Affairs New News" recorded that after watching the performance, female students in Wuhan collectively swore "not to be dolls", while female workers in a factory in Shanghai associated the "sound of the door closing" with a symbol of "breaking the foreman's shackles" during their discussion. This cross-class emotional resonance confirms Rosenwan's "emotional community" theory, that is, different groups share emotional symbols. In the drama performance, this act of "slamming the door shut" became a shared emotional symbol among the audience, forming a temporary alliance to criticize tradition.

However, there has always been tension within the emotional community: A certain girls' high school in Nanjing was pressured by the school for performing in "Nora", and the participating students were suspended from school, which led to *Nora, Be Braver!* And other articles of support from the public. In the debate, conservatives criticized the image of Nora with "a woman usurping man's power (Pin Ji Si Chen)", progressive intellectuals defended it by citing "personality independence", while the female workers' group was more concerned about "whether the performance could improve factory treatment" in the discussion. This diverse voice reveals that "Nora" has transcended the realm of drama and become an emotional trigger for multiple contradictions such as gender, class, and power. As Lynn Hunt put it, the meaning of political symbols is never singular but is dynamically generated in the struggle and reconstruction among different groups.

6 Conclusion: a re-examination of the May Fourth social transformation from the perspective of emotional history

This article takes the dissemination and adaptation of *A Doll's House* in China as a clue to examine how "Nora" as an emotional symbol was accepted, rewritten, mobilized and resisted by subjects from all walks of life. By analyzing dimensions such as intellectuals' translation, literary re-creation, stage play performances, social debates and grassroots resistance, we can see that the society after the May Fourth Movement was not merely a product of rationalism, but also a period of highly active emotional politics. From Hu Shi's idealistic adaptation to Lu Xun's deconstruction of reality, from the symbolic domestication of citizen culture to the stratified practice of the female group, the acceptance history of "Nora" during the May-Fourth period is essentially an experiment of reconstructing the emotional system. When Ibsen's "individual awakening" encountered China's ethical tradition of "family and state isomorphism", different groups completed symbolic reconstruction by localizing the individualistic emotions in their works: intellectuals endowed it with

enlightenment significance, the citizen class made ethical adjustments, and women chose resistance strategies based on class differences. This diverse practice not only embodies what Reddi calls "emotional labor", that is, the strategic response of individuals to social norms, but also confirms Wang Qingjia's insight of "emotional historical transformation" - that any emotional expression is the result of the joint effect of power relations and cultural traditions in a specific historical context, and the localization process of "Nora" is precisely a microcosm of the birth of China's modern emotional system.

The construction of the "Nora" emotional community not only promotes the awakening of gender consciousness but also drives the transformation of social structural imagination. This article attempts to re-incorporate the voices of marginalized women, their failure experiences, and non-mainstream emotions into the analysis, providing a richer path for understanding the May Fourth Movement and its historical impact, and also responding to contemporary society's continuous inquiries about emotional expression and gender justice.

As an interdisciplinary research field, the study of emotional history inevitably faces the challenges brought about by the intersection of different disciplines. In the research process, how to accurately grasp the complex relationship between emotions and social structures as well as cultural traditions, and how to rationally apply multi-disciplinary research methods and theoretical tools, remain issues that require further exploration. Furthermore, due to the limitations of historical materials, our research on the emotional practices of some marginalized groups is not yet in-depth and comprehensive enough, which also leaves room for future studies.

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